

Abused and Abusers

BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS. By Frantz Fanon. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann from the French, "Peau Noire, Masques Blancs." 232 pp. New York: Grove Press. \$5.

By ROBERT COLES

ABOUT two years ago Frantz Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth" appeared in America, and since then a growing number of both Negroes and whites have found this direct, personal message on the problems of race the most convincing and appealing one around. In that book, written toward the end of his short life (he died of cancer at 36) he tried to show what colonialism does to both victim and oppressor—a subject he was certainly in a position to understand. He had come to France from Martinique, another black man from an overseas "protectorate" in search of an education and some "freedom." He went to medical school, became a psychiatrist and during the Algerian rebellion was sent to Africa, where he soon lost interest in treating French soldiers who were trying to keep one more nation in bondage.

Until his death Fanon worked as a doctor for the rebels and, to further their cause, wrote passionate articles, essays and books, although, as is often the case in a man's life, there were earlier signs that he would not sit back and practice psychiatry among upper-class Parisians (or French Algerians) while the subject people of Africa went through a decisive struggle for independence. In 1952, when he was 27—before he was to join the Algerian rebels—his first book, "Black Skin, White Masks," was published in France; at that time he commented that it "should have been written three years ago. . . . But these truths were a fire in me then. Now I can tell them without being burned." As some of his colleagues might put it: he obviously had his "problems" for a long time.

DR. COLES, a research psychiatrist at the Harvard University Health Services, wrote the forthcoming "Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear."

YES, the black man is supposed to be a good nigger; once this has been laid down, the rest follows of itself. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible. And naturally, just as a Jew who spends money without thinking about it is suspect, a black man who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched. Please understand me: watched in the sense that he is starting something. Certainly I do not contend that the black student is suspect to his fellows or to his teachers. But outside university circles there is an army of fools: What is important is not to educate them, but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes.

—From "Black Skin, White Masks."

His "problems" started at birth, and would not have cleared up with a lifetime of "therapy"; nor in his estimate will white doctors everywhere escape the "problems" that plague them as members of racist, exploitative societies. If the Negro can never get around the psychological consequences of his condition, the white man, particularly the one who fancies himself sensitive and compassionate, will forever squirm as he tries to rationalize or forget the elementary fact that black skin is all that is necessary to keep citizens of the world's leading democracies from money, power and self-respect.

Fanon took up the mentality of the oppressor in his later books; in this first one he has on his mind himself and millions of other Negroes. He wants to make his own people more self-conscious, in the best sense of that word, so that perhaps they, rather than he as a psychiatrist, will bring the white man to his senses; that is, make him do something about his guilts and the economic or political facts that continue to justify those guilts.

TO achieve his purposes Fanon draws from a number of sources—his own life, his observations in the Antilles and in France, and the writings of social scientists, novelists and poets. However, since he is writing to awaken people, to inform them so that they will act, he makes no effort to be systematic, comprehensive, or even orderly. Quite the contrary, one feels a brilliant, vivid and hurt mind, walking the thin line that separates effective outrage from despair.

Right off, the reader is told not to expect still another psychological analysis of the Negro "mind" or "personality." The meaning of being black is what the author wants to spell out, but the social facts that make for that "meaning" have to be stated again and again, particularly by a psychiatrist, who knows how many of his colleagues are quite ready to forget what a hungry stomach, a scornful look, or the butt of a rifle can do to a man's unconscious, to



Drawing by Charles White. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jack Stein. Courtesy A.C.A. Gallery.

his "inner" life of dreams and fantasies, to his sense of "reality." Fanon leaves nothing undone to make his point that the black man, no matter how ingenious, adaptive or even de-luded he becomes, cannot escape the history of his people.

As a psychiatrist he summons what every clinician knows about the child's early susceptibility to the fears and anxieties of his parents, and relates that knowledge to Negroes, who are predominantly poor and kept apart—as their children eventually discover and never forget. As a philosopher he calls upon men like Sartre, who have written about "the other" (be he Jew, Hun, Bolshevik or next-door neighbor) and insists that the problem of color is much more complicated than even they say. (Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently than the white man. . . . The white man is not only 'the other' but also the master, whether real or imaginary.") As a writer he demonstrates what others have before him, how insidiously the problem of race, of color, connects with a whole range of words and images; so that black becomes associated with the dark and the shadowy, with evil, sadness and corruption, while white

merges into what is light, hopeful, clean and pure.

Yet it is Fanon the man, rather than the medical specialist or intellectual, who makes this book so hard to put down. His ideas and feelings fairly pour out, and often he makes no effort to tone down his language, to sound like a detached *raisonneur*, that image so many American psychiatrists cultivate. He clearly had every chance to deceive himself, to become a prosperous doctor very much "accepted" by liberal and even doting white friends. Instead he became a fighter and a voice for the oppressed, whom he also had the courage to warn: no religious or mystical attitude, no psychological "defense" will enable the Negro to feel "secure" or "himself" until he is no longer the white man's social and economic prey; and when that moment comes—he died believing it was not near at hand—the Negro will be able to demonstrate the same wonderful and awful possibilities that every other man does. To have known that at 27, Frantz Fanon must have liberated himself not only from racism, but a good number of other dead-end streets that continue to attract the rest of us, no matter what our color.